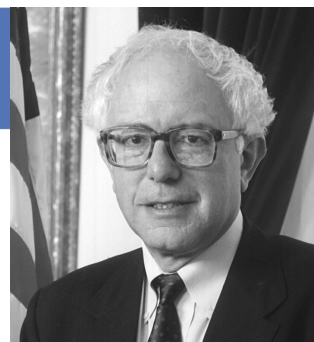




U.S. Representative

Bernie Sanders

A Special Focus on Veterans' Issues



Winter 2003

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Fellow Vermonter,

Thank you for your service to our country.

I am taking this opportunity to update you on information of importance to veterans. If my office can assist you in any way, please contact us at 1-800-339-9834. My veterans' specialist Sam Haskins and other staff members have a great deal of experience on veterans' issues and will do all they can to assist you. I also invite you to visit my website at **bernie.house.gov** for frequently updated information about a variety of important issues.

As you may know, for the past many years my office has worked very hard to inform veterans about the benefits they have earned through their service to the nation. We have held veterans meetings in dozens of communities throughout our state, with thousands of Vermonters in attendance. As a result, I have heard from many hundreds of veterans around the state who have enrolled in the VA health system or accessed some other veterans benefit. This is an effort we are going to continue.

I must tell you, however, that I am deeply distressed about recent developments at the White House and in the Congress and how they have impacted funding for veterans' needs. As you may know, since last Spring the VA – against my strong opposition – has been wait-listing veterans newly enrolling in the VA health system. And now, the VA has gone a step further. As of January 17, 2003, they have eliminated the ability of a whole category of veterans even to get on the waiting list.

This is an outrage and a national disgrace. I do not understand how the President and Congressional leaders can find hundreds of billions of dollars in tax breaks for the richest people in this country, and yet not be able to appropriate a few billion to provide health care for the men and women who have put their lives on the line to defend this country. What kind of national priorities is that?

I am in agreement with Ronald F. Conley, the American Legion National Commander, who states: "For instance, if Congress ever again approves a supplemental spending bill containing funding for VA, the president would do well not to veto it, as he did last year. The administration also should not ask Congress for less than VA needs, then tell veterans: 'Sorry. We didn't budget for you.' Imagine the message that sends to someone either wearing the uniform today or considering an offer from a military recruiter."

The simple truth is that we are the richest nation in the history of the world. We can and must provide our veterans with the health care and other benefits that they were promised.

I hope you find this newsletter informative. Once again, if my office can be of service to you, please contact us.

Sincerely yours,

Bernard Sanders
U.S. Congressman

Get the Veterans Benefits That You Are Eligible For

Even though the VA is trying to scale back veterans benefits, there are many Vermonters who qualify even under the more restricted guidelines. These benefits can include health care, low-cost prescription drugs, disability compensation, home-buying assistance and more. Often it is

difficult at first glance for a veteran to know whether he or she is eligible. That's where Congressman Sanders' office is available to help. Experienced staff can help you sort through what benefits you may have earned as a result of your service. The recent cutbacks show why it is important to participate if you are eligible.

The Administration cut off new Priority 8 veterans, but those enrolled before Jan. 17 can continue to receive care. Even if you are healthy now, it is important to enroll in order to potentially preserve your right to get VA health care in the future. Please contact Rep. Sanders' office today at 800-339-9834 to find out what benefits you may be due.

Veterans Health Care Being Short-Changed

Incredibly, there are now some 300,000 veterans on waiting lists for VA health care. The reason for these waiting lists is simple: The federal government continues to underfund the VA health care system. The funding shortfall has only been made worse by President Bush's refusal to use some \$275 million in additional funding that Congress approved this past fall.

Using funding shortfalls as an excuse, the VA started wait-listing veterans in Vermont and throughout the country last spring. As announced by the VA, veterans would move off the waiting list only if and when another veteran currently receiving care either died or moved out of the service area. Can you imagine that?

And then, to add insult to injury, the VA went even further on January 17, 2003, when it issued a new policy that cuts off a whole category of veterans from even getting on the waiting list. This new policy eliminates so-called "Priority 8" veterans from VA health care eligibility. These "8's" are veterans who don't have a service-connected disability and who, according to the VA, are "higher income." Estimates are that the affected group of veterans equals 160,000 men and women.

The truth, however, is that most of these veterans are far from well-off. Single veterans with incomes as low as \$25,000 fall into Priority 8 status, as do married veterans with incomes of \$30,000. The result of this policy is that many veterans in this category who would have signed up with the VA will now be unable to receive the health care and prescription drugs they require.

The problems facing the veterans health care system are not complicated. The system needs more money! Health care and prescription drug costs are escalating, and more veterans are flocking into the VA system to take advantage of the benefits they are entitled to. Further, the veterans' population is aging, and many veterans need extensive medical treatment.

As bad as the current situation is, there are those who would make it even worse. The *VFW Washington Weekly* of January 31, 2003, writes; "Unfortunately, there are proposals that would cut VA funding, causing it to lose out on any increase it would have had since the Fiscal Year began in October. Another proposal, which has already passed the Senate, would cut funding by \$700 million.

Neither of these proposals is acceptable, particularly considering the crisis the VA health care system faces. It is outrageous that this Congress would even propose a cut in VA health care funding when the system is already failing veterans because of a lack of funding!"



Where do we go from here? On January 23, Rep. Sanders and Vermont's Senators sent a letter to President Bush asking that he reverse the cutoff of Priority 8 veterans and that he increase his VA budget request to an amount that would cover all veterans. As the VFW recently stated in its newsletter; "We must have a system that will allow VA to meet the actual demand for health care instead of tailoring services to meet the budget." In that light, Bernie has joined in support of legislation that would immediately boost VA spending by 20%.

In the long run, Congressman Sanders believes that the best solution to resolve the ongoing crisis of VA health care funding will be legislation that he is co-sponsoring that

would provide mandatory funding for VA health care. This bill has a formula built into it that will ensure VA receives adequate funding to meet its statutory requirement to treat all veterans who enroll for health care. This would prevent VA benefits from having to compete with other federal spending categories.

Serving the Health Needs of Soldiers Past and Present

As part of this year's defense spending bill, Rep. Sanders secured \$500,000 for a Department of Defense/VA health care program at the VA Community Outreach Clinic at Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester, VT. This new pilot program will allow the hiring of medical specialists to care for National Guard members and Vermont veterans. In sum, this Demonstration Project would be a win-win development for both the Vermont National Guard and the VA.

Good News For GI Bill Users

For veterans taking advantage of their G.I. Bill benefits, legislation passed during the last session of Congress is paying off. As of January 1, 2002, the monthly full-time educational benefit rose to \$800 a month. This past October 1, it went to \$900 a month and on October 1 of this year it will go to \$985 a month.



Standing with Rep. Sanders at the press conference in support of veterans benefits are, from left to right, Jeff Reed, DAV, Ed Laviletta, VFW, Milt Willis, American Legion and A.J. Paige, Vietnam Veterans of America.

Push to End Ban on Concurrent Receipt

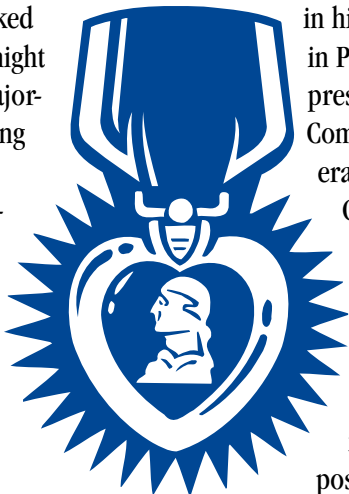
Since coming to Congress in 1991, Rep. Sanders has supported correcting an inequity in federal law that affects military retirees who are eligible for both a pension and VA disability benefits. Under current law, many veterans cannot receive 100% of both benefits even though they are earned separately. Last year it finally looked like this unreasonable law might be repealed. A bipartisan majority of the U.S. House, including Rep. Sanders, had co-sponsored legislation to allow so-called “concurrent receipt” of both pension and disability benefits. And the U.S. Senate actually added an amendment to the Defense bill that would have allowed concurrent receipt.

As many of you may know, what ended up passing the Congress was a much scaled-back provision that applied only to disabled veterans who either (1) were awarded a Purple Heart indicating a combat wound and are at least 10 percent disabled; or (2) are at least 60 percent disabled as a result of armed conflict (but not a wound leading to a Purple Heart), including those wounds suffered during hazardous duty, field training, exercises, or war games. (See the box on the right for more details on this new Special Compensation for Combat Disabled Veterans program.)

Why, if a majority of the U.S. House and U.S. Senate approved the broad, pro-veteran version, did veterans end up with such a narrow bill? The answer is pretty straightforward. In the final days of the Congress, the President insisted that the broad concurrent receipt language be taken out of the Defense bill. If Congress did not, he threatened to veto it. He claimed the reason was that there was not enough money in the federal budget.

But this year the President is proposing \$335 billion in new tax cuts that will go to the top 1% of taxpayers – those making an average of over \$1 million a year. That’s four times more than the \$80 billion over ten years that it would have cost to provide all eligible veterans with their full military retirement and their full disability pay. (And that doesn’t include the more than \$500 billion in the President’s 2001 tax cuts that went to the highest-earning 1%. If you include those cuts, the President has pushed or is pushing tax cuts for Americans with an average income over a

million dollars a year that are ten times more than the amount needed to do away with the injustice of veterans having their retirement and disability offset!) Why are there hundreds of billions for tax cuts for the wealthiest – but not even a fraction of that amount for veterans?



Rep. Sanders was not alone in his profound disappointment in President Bush’s action. In a press release last year, the then-Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, James Goldsmith, summed up the President’s veto threat this way: “At a time when members of the Armed Forces are on the front lines in the war on terrorism, the Administration’s position represents a thoughtless and inexcusable wrong visited upon those who have suffered physical and mental injuries because they were willing to accept hardships only a few are willing to endure.”

In a letter to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, the National Commander of the Disabled American Veterans wrote, “It is outrageous that government officials use the War on Terror to justify unfair treatment of brave citizens who fought in wars past. Heroes . . . have already sacrificed, in blood, on behalf of our nation’s freedom. They should not further have to sacrifice their quality of life because of an archaic law that allows the government to escape its debt to military retirees who dedicated their adult lives to service to our nation and our way of life.”

Gulf War Illness Update

As many of you may know, last April the VA announced that Gulf War veterans who had come down with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease, are eligible for disability compensation and health care. This is a major step forward in acknowledging the devastating impact of Gulf War Illness, but more needs to be done for the over 100,000 veterans suffering from this illness. As was the case with Agent Orange, members of Congress and the veterans’ organizations are going to have to remain vigilant to make certain that we fully understand the cause of Gulf War Illness, and that we develop a treatment for this debilitating disease.

Are you eligible for the new Special Compensation for Combat Disabled Veterans program?

While the Administration put a halt to full concurrent receipt, veterans who are eligible for the scaled-back plan, known as the Special Compensation for Combat Disabled Veterans program, should enroll.

To qualify, disabled retirees must have 20 years or more of active duty, or of a combination of active duty and reserve time. Retirees with combat-related disabilities will be eligible for the new special compensation. The amount will be the same as compensation paid for the combat wound. Also included are retirees with disability ratings of 60% or higher for other illnesses or injuries attributable to combat situations, combat-oriented training, hazardous duty, or instrumentalities of war. Disabilities that were incurred in the following four categories qualify for the new plan:

- as a result of armed conflict (not resulting in a Purple Heart)
- while performing hazardous service – examples are parachute duty, demolition duty, etc.
- under conditions simulating war – examples are injuries resulting from war games, practice alerts, grenade and live-fire training, hand-to-hand combat training, etc.
- caused by an instrumentality of war – examples include if a person steps on a mine, accidents involving military combat vehicles, injury or sickness caused by fumes or gas from military ordnance, etc. (There must be a direct causal relationship between the instrumentality of war and the disability.)

Unlike the current version of special compensation that pays a flat rate, the new plan will not be limited to a specific dollar amount, nor is there a requirement that the disability must have occurred within a specific number of years after retirement. Eligible retirees must choose either the new or the old plan, to acquire the maximum benefit.

Rep. Bernie Sanders

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If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter, we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend.
This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense.

New Ailments Slowly But Surely Added to List of Service-Connected Conditions

For too long veterans who have become ill due to environmental exposures, such as Agent Orange in Vietnam or unidentified chemicals in the Gulf Region, have had a difficult time getting the federal government to give them the treatment and compensation they deserve. Just this past January, there was good news in this regard for Vietnam-era veterans. In January, the VA added Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia, or CLL, to the list of conditions presumed to be service-connected for Agent-Orange-exposed veterans. According to the VA, they expect 500 new veterans to be diagnosed with this condition each year. The VA's determination was based on the

findings of a study by the federal Institute of Medicine.
Agent-Orange-exposed veterans also benefited when efforts by Rep. Sanders and others pushed the VA to include Adult-Onset Diabetes Mellitus (Type II Diabetes) on the list of conditions presumed to be service-connected. And last session, Congress did away with a provision that was sure to hurt a lot of Vietnam veterans. Under the old law, there was a presumptive service connection for respiratory cancers, but only if illness occurred within 30 years of herbicide exposure. That meant many Vietnam veterans who would get such cancers in the future might not get the benefits and health care

they deserve. Now, with the change, the 30-year time limit has been removed.
And finally, federal law now requires that the VA presume that all veterans who served in Vietnam during the Vietnam era were exposed to Agent Orange. This guarantees that veterans only need to prove that they served in Vietnam. No longer will they need to go through the difficult – and sometimes impossible – task of showing that they actually came in contact with the dangerous herbicide.



Contact Information for Veterans

State Veterans Affairs Office Montpelier	828-3379	Dept. of Veterans Affairs	
Vermont Veterans Home Bennington	442-6353	Acquisition Resources	
VA Regional Office (Benefits and Assistance)		Service (businesses)	202-273-8815
White River Jct.	296-5177	Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business	
Toll-free	800-827-1000	Utilization	202-565-8124
Medical Center White River Jct.	295-9363	Director for Information Management Service	
VA Outreach Clinic White River Jct.	866-687-8387	(Freedom of Information Act Requests)	202-273-8135
VA Outpatient Clinics Colchester	655-1356	To report waste or abuse in the VA:	
Bennington	447-6913	Inspector General's Hotline.	800-488-8244
Rutland	773-3386		
St. Johnsbury	603-444-9328	Annual Report - write to the Analysis and Reports Service;	
South Burlington	862-1806	810 Vermont Avenue, NW; Washington, D.C. 20420	
White River Junction	295-2908		
Toll-free	800-649-6603		